

## **The Man in Black: Matisyahu, Identity, and Authenticity**

**By Sarah Imhoff**

On August 6, 2006, thousands of fans at Chicago's Lollapalooza music festival danced to reggae in the sweltering heat under the sun. The performer wore black pants and a gray long-sleeve collared shirt in spite of the heat. Instead of dreadlocks or a knit cap, he sported a full beard and a yarmulke. White fringes hung down in front of his pants, next to the badge identifying him as a performer. At one point, during a joyful frenzy of onstage dancing, his yarmulke came flying off. Without missing a beat, he took the nearby white towel—provided to performers for wiping away sweat—and held it atop his head with his left hand while his right hand held the microphone. He did not want to stop the show, but he also needed to ensure that his head would not be bare. The crowd had surprises, too: instead of a sea of red, green, and black Jamaican flags, as one might expect to see at a reggae show, this crowd had a smattering of white-and-blue Israeli flags. Some sang along with lyrics that called to “Hashem” and made allusions to the Torah. The crowd was a mixture of fans and others who might best be described as gawkers: Was he for real? Who was this observant Jew singing reggae and calling for “Moshiah now”? But one could also ask questions about most of the people watching: Why should a crowd of young, mostly secular pop-music listeners care about a Hasidic Jew? Was it just about the novelty?

Critics and fans have already written much about the life, music, and performance of Matisyahu, the most prominent Hasidic reggae musician, and his visibility is still growing. On December 18, 2009, he appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman*—performing under a

dreidel-shaped disco ball. He was on PBS's Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly the week before.<sup>1</sup> His new single "One Day" is the official "anthem" of NBC's broadcast of the 2010 Winter Olympics. Professional music critics have been lukewarm about both his talent and performance from the beginning. But others, from both inside and outside Jewish communities, have embraced the black-hatted reggae star. Cultural critics have speculated about the racial implications of a Hasid performing in a Jamaican tradition. Other Hasidic Jews have variously embraced him, tried to ignore him, and lambasted him as desecrating the name of God. Why is there so much interest in an artist who, by all accounts, had no obvious target audience? Here I argue that Matisyahu and the public discussions of his identity signify different things to different people: Many fans are most concerned with how Jewish he is; critics are concerned with how reggae he is. In the end, I suggest that there is so much cultural interest in Matisyahu because he symbolizes the difficulty with constructing identity and determining authenticity.

Matthew Miller, better known by his Hebrew stage name Matisyahu, was born in suburban Pennsylvania to Reconstructionist Jewish parents. After a brief stint in Berkeley, California, the family moved to White Plains, New York where Miller spent most of his youth. There he attended both Hebrew school and high school, but never demonstrated particular enthusiasm for either. His interests lay more in listening to music and experiencing highs from hallucinogenic drugs and marijuana. In an effort to "get out of high school for a few months," as an interview with the *Jewish Daily Forward* explained, Miller signed up for a semester-long study trip in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

According to Miller, he began to think seriously about Judaism and to solidify his own Jewish identity there, but the journey did not translate into answers to questions about how his Jewishness would fit with his life in the United States. Soon after his return, he dropped out of

his senior year of high school and followed the jam-band Phish on their tours. The culture of fans following Phish and similar bands was an outgrowth of the “deadhead” culture that revolved around the Grateful Dead and their music in earlier decades. This hippie culture, with which Miller identified, focused on music, drugs, and communal fellowship. After a return to New York, his parents convinced him to attend an alternative wilderness-style school—similar in structure to some residential rehabilitation programs—in Oregon. Once there, he discovered the world of hip hop and began to perform at open-microphone competitions. In retrospect, Matisyahu credits his experience in Oregon with making him aware of the centrality of Jewishness to his identity: as one of a very few Jews there—unlike in New York—he began to rap and MC with an Israeli flag wrapped around his shoulders and occasionally include parts of traditional Jewish prayers in his performances.

Only after his return to New York did he begin to explore Jewish spirituality more seriously. While simultaneously honing his skills as a reggae and rap artist, he took classes on Judaism at the New School. From there, the early connection he had felt between reggae music’s themes (e.g. exile and Zion, Babylon and Jerusalem) and Judaism flourished. He began attending the Carlebach synagogue, named for the late Chabad-affiliated Shlomo Carlebach who was often called “the singing rabbi” for his joyful singing, dancing, and ability to attract young counter-cultural Jews to greater religious observance, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. Services at the Carlebach shul appealed to Miller because of their emphasis on singing, dancing, and expression as well as their diverse and often counter-cultural attendees. As Miller found himself more attracted to Jewish learning and observance, he began to talk regularly with Dov Yonah Korn, the Chabad rabbi at NYU, who also had a past similar to Miller: he had followed both the Grateful Dead and Phish on their tours and had experimented with drugs.

Hasidic music, despite its stylistic differences from his beloved hip hop and reggae, continued to be central to Miller's new experiences of Judaism. When Miller went to a *farbrengen*,<sup>3</sup> a joyous Hasidic gathering, at the headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch community at 770 Eastern Parkway (often simply called "770"), he related to the songs on a personal level. Singing the songs of the past rebbes, or male spiritual leaders of the Lubavitch movement, made Miller's struggle one not only with Judaism but also with his personal life. From there, Miller made the decision to "become religious," which for him meant joining the Chabad movement. It would also mean leaving his parents' home, which he felt was no longer acceptable for his level of religious observance, and moving to Crown Heights, a mostly Hasidic neighborhood.

Through his experience with Chabad, therefore, Matthew Miller became a *ba'al teshuva* (plural *ba'alei teshuva*) or a Jewish person who "returns" to greater observance. *Ba'alei teshuva* are a significant—if not numerically dominant—phenomenon in the Jewish community. The Chabad movement actively seeks to bring non-observant and less-observant Jews to more observant lifestyles. Although this approach has been met with mixed reviews from both less-observant Jews and other Hasidic sects, which do not actively seek returnees, Chabad and its emissaries have met with noteworthy success in many of their outreach endeavors. They have established a network of single-sex yeshivas designated for adults who want to learn more about the Lubavitcher way of life and texts. In some ways, Miller followed a fairly typical path: he attended a yeshiva with day-long Torah study specifically for *ba'alei teshuva*, he stayed with a Lubavitcher family while studying, he began to wear the iconic hat and coat, he stopped watching television and listening to secular music, and he changed his first name. Most *ba'alei*

*teshuva* begin referring to themselves by the Hebrew name their parents gave them at birth, but Miller opted for the Hebrew version of his own first name: Matisyahu.

### **How Jewish?**

Matthew Miller's turn to Matisyahu, then, was not unique. Many liberal and secular Jews have turned to greater Orthodoxy in general, and Chabad-Lubavitch in particular. Why has he garnered so much attention? Is the appeal just the novelty of seeing a six-foot five-inch man in a black hat and coat dancing about the stage? Why do fans find him compelling? And why do music critics and cultural commentators love to critique him?

One potential avenue for interpreting the response to Matisyahu is to consider his fans. Rather than a group of people who are otherwise regular reggae-listeners or hip hop aficionados, the Israeli flags at concerts and smattering of Yiddish on websites and discussions related to Matisyahu demonstrate at least a significant and vocal portion of his fan base is made of self-identified Jews. Even the non-Jews among his fans note his Jewishness. Of his listeners (and parents of listeners), the salient factor in appraising Matisyahu seems to reside in how authentically Jewish they perceive him to be.

The simple fact of his obvious Jewishness may account for some of his popularity. The popular and rock music markets have long supported Christian bands and music with overtly Christian themes. In the last decade, bands like Creed and P.O.D. have found their places in the regular rotation of rock radio stations. In fact, in what MTV cheekily referred to as an "interfaith marriage," Matisyahu agreed to collaborate on two songs on P.O.D.'s 2006 album *Testify*. His collaboration indicates that he sees himself in this vein.<sup>4</sup> P.O.D., too, clearly saw Matisyahu as their natural counterpart: one band member told MTV, "He is a Hasidic Jew, and everybody knows

that we are a spiritual band, and we just thought that collaborating with him and the way that he believed and the way that he conducted himself would be something special.”<sup>5</sup> What would be “special,” apparently, is the collaboration of two “spiritual” musical acts, even—or perhaps precisely because—those two spiritualities were very different. Each act saw the other as not only singing about religious themes but also conducting themselves in ways that are consonant with those religious themes. While many popular rock and even hip hop musicians have been Jewish, from Bob Dylan and Lou Reed to the Beastie Boys, few have used overtly Jewish religious themes or scriptural references in their music. But in Matisyahu, young men and women attending Hebrew school or waiting to be bar or bat mitzvahed can both hear and see Judaism—not just cultural Jewishness. For this reason, part of Matisyahu’s popularity may be that his music fills a niche for Jewish teenagers and young adults: it is at once radio-friendly and unapologetically, religiously Jewish.

Along similar lines, Matisyahu serves as a Jewish role model: regardless of their own levels of observance, his Jewish fans know that he does not perform on the Sabbath, they see his *tzitzit* (fringes), and they hear his lyrics about living ethically and respecting God. P.O.D., in its invitation to Matisyahu, pointed out his conduct in addition to his belief. Throughout his affiliation with it, Chabad used his role model potential to promote Judaism and ethical living as appealing and even fun. For example, the movement’s website Chabad.org printed a long interview with Matisyahu about how he would spend his Passover in 2006—at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Chabad house, interacting with college students. The question-and-answer format and his musings about what wisdom he had for young Jews promoted him as an exemplar to be followed, especially by non-Hasidic Jews since most Hasidim do not use the internet. At one point, the interviewer asked him a scripted question enquiring about his story of

how he personally distributed free matzahs at Sony Records just before Passover. Then, as a way of summing up Matisyahu's comments, the interviewer stated: "It sounds like you're pretty clear about your priorities." The overall message, noted by the first commenter on the site, was that this was an example "for the young spiritual mind to see that Jewish musicians have much to offer."<sup>6</sup>

But all of the media attention, the appearances with Letterman, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, and Jimmy Kimmel, Esquire's "Most Lovable Oddball" award, and the interest of cultural critics cannot be explained exclusively by thinking of Matisyahu as a Jewish role model who makes music. The man and his music have two important factors that complicate the picture: first, he is Hasidic, and second, he is a reggae artist. The two, as Matisyahu found during his adolescent struggles, are not immediately or obviously compatible, and each has contributed to his celebrity in both expected and unexpected ways.

Matisyahu's Hasidic identity has been a topic of conversation since he first burst onto the music scene in 2004. From his early shows in the iconic black hat and coat of Chabad-Lubavitch to his 2007 move to try to transcend group labels, his religious identity and practice have been central to almost every interview, article, and discussion about him. In general, most less observant Jews and most non-Jews have demonstrated an admiration for his ability to both be religious and bring that spirituality to his musical performance, while other Orthodox Jews have had more mixed reactions. In both cases, however, many of the reactions seem to hinge on the issue of authenticity.

Other non- and less-religious Jews find Matisyahu appealing because he is Hasidic, but he manages to be so in a non-threatening way. Fans think of him as authentically Hasidic and Jewish at least in part because it allows for them to feel both nostalgia for and connection to a

kind of Judaism that they themselves do not live. His performances allows these fans a chance to dance and sing ecstatically without the textual study and regimented religious observance. In short, Matisyahu's image draws on the nostalgia of Jews for the "old world"<sup>7</sup> and Hasidism without conjuring up the distaste often associated with Hasidic communities' perceived attitudes of superiority and insularity.

The singing, dancing, and general celebratory atmosphere of Matisyahu's performances are therefore a kind of throw-back to the populism of early Hasidism. After its beginnings in the eighteenth century, Hasidism proved to be a popular movement: because its philosophy emphasized prayer as a valuable primary path to God, it validated the religious experience of men and women who did not have the education to approach God through the traditional path of textual study. In addition to the many peasants who found a spiritual home in this new pietistic Judaism, those who had felt their spiritual needs unmet through study of Talmud or traditional Kabbalah also flocked to Hasidism. The movement and its followers sought to unseat scholarship as the sole best way to be Jewish, and elevate bodily practices like prayerful praise to its religious level. It also democratized this access to God. For instance, whereas in other Orthodox Jewish communities, a man called the *hazan* was the sole prayer leader and singer, all Hasidim would sing and chant prayers. Although over time Hasidim have come to emphasize study and learning again, the traditions of enthusiastic group dancing and singing as religious activities have continued.

Whether or not his less-religious fans are cognizant of the history of Hasidism, then, some of the features of Matisyahu's performances that attract them are rooted in this very history. At his concerts, he dances and encourages everyone else to do so. Fans sing along, and Matisyahu encourages the audience to repeat key phrases. Regardless of their level of Torah



learning, these fans are all equal before the music. They can sing, dance, and call out to God along with Matisyahu; they can be singers and dancers in a community calling for greater ethical behavior and imminent redemption. This allows them to have a similar kind of Jewish experience in a different atmosphere. Because of its populist nature, it even allows for non-Jews to participate equally in a performance that is a citation of Hasidic practice. Elsewhere in American culture, the growing interest in Kabbalah among non-Jews demonstrates a similar phenomenon. Both demonstrate that a significant number of less-observant Jews and non-Jews desire to “experience” some Jewish rituals and practices.

Matisyahu’s concerts also recall a more recent Hasidic phenomenon, at least in a physically structural way. The crowd, packed together, all stands and dances while facing forward and watching him, in a way that recalls the *farbrengens* at 770 when the last Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson led them. In these gatherings, mostly Hasidic men in black hats and jackets would pack into a large room to see and hear their Rebbe. The atmosphere was celebratory and excited, and, like many concerts with standing patrons, these *farbrengens* also saw a fair amount of pushing and jostling to get near the front and see and hear the Rebbe better. The Rebbe would offer interpretations of the Torah, Hasidic stories, and sing Hasidic melodies, and the celebrations would often last late into the night. At Matisyahu’s shows, the structural similarity of the spiritual leader standing in front of the rejoicing crowd and telling Hasidic stories—Matisyahu’s song “So Hi So Lo,” for instance, is loosely based on the story of Nachman of Bratzlav—and rendering Torah and its verses applicable to the crowd certainly recalls a Hasidic gathering. The movement of the dense crowd, its members singing and dancing and touching one another’s backs and shoulders like one large and interconnected organism, could be the movement of a crowd of ecstatic Hasidim. While it would certainly be a stretch to suggest

that these parallels makes Matisyahu some kind of latter-day Rebbe, his concerts certainly allow the audience members to tap in to a group spiritual experience of singing and dancing.

Of course, the *farbrengens* at 770 allowed only men to be on the main floor because contact between men and women who are not married to one another is prohibited, while both men and women attend Matisyahu's concerts. And Matisyahu's audiences are populated by both Jews and non-Jews, while *farbrengens*, although open to the public, have almost exclusively Hasidim. These differences between traditional *farbrengens* and Matisyahu's shows, however, point to another reason for Matisyahu's popularity: inclusiveness.

In contemporary American culture, Hasidim are most known for their distinctive modes of dress (especially male clothing), very conservative values, and insulated communities. The men's clothing, in and of itself, has been relatively non-controversial in the image of Hasidim. But as a marker of very conservative values and insulated communities, the black hats and long coats have come to signify the much more divisive issue of exclusiveness.

While they have been met with mixed reception, as well as complete ignorance, by many non-Jews, Hasidim—and Chabad in particular—also do not enjoy unqualified support from the rest of the Jewish community. In her study of literary representations of Hasidic Jews in the US, Nora Rubel characterizes this friction between Hasidim and non-Orthodox Jews as an “undeclared culture war.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, many Jews who are affiliated with other communities resent that most Hasidim consider those communities—and even their rabbis—as illegitimate Jews. Many also find Chabad's missionary efforts “weird,” “creepy,” “cultish,” or simply insulting in their assumption that Chabad is superior to other kinds of Jewishness.<sup>9</sup> Others are also concerned that the thought and philosophy of contemporary Hasidim reflect badly on a Jewish community that otherwise values equality. For instance, Hasidic women do not

participate in many of the public religious rituals and are encouraged to have lives that center exclusively on the home. Because of these ideals and the gendered hierarchy of the family, many other Jews feel that Hasidic practices marginalize or demean women. One woman recently summed up her objection to Chabad: “What really bothers me is the non-egalitarianism.”<sup>10</sup> Some Hasidim can also project a sense of superiority over others, which many non-Hasidic Jews find repellant. Chabad theology suggests that only Jews have “an additional godly soul and are thus privileged, above other people, to make the world a holy place.”<sup>11</sup> Hasidim have been variously accused of being sexist, racist, and considering all non-Jews lesser beings. Rubel has explained this tension: “On the one hand, there is respect for the defenders of the faith, who despite all obstacles and influences insist on keeping the flame of observant Judaism alive. But on the other hand there exists an anger towards those who, while claiming to be the only true Jews, espouse attitudes that the majority of American Jews reject.”<sup>12</sup>

With these objections, it is somewhat surprising how popular Matisyahu is among less observant Jews. As for the distinctive mode of dress, during his early career, Matisyahu wore the distinctive black fedora and *kapote*, the long, dark coat associated with Chabad-Lubavitch. Visually, then, he signified the traditional Hasid, which meant religious observance but also separate, exclusive, and even judgmental. But his music and performance told a different version of that story.

Matisyahu has always distanced himself with any kind of behavior that might be seen as either exclusivist or clannish. In a 2008 interview with the *Forward*, for instance, he explained his EP *Shattered* in universalist terms: “I took classic Jewish works and stories and things that are really universal. I found them within Judaism, but any spirituality or religion around the world would identify with the themes.”<sup>13</sup> While still identifying himself as Jewish, he insists that

his music can be consonant with “any spirituality.” Even before he distanced himself from Chabad, his music had inclusivist themes. For instance, the title track of his 2006 album *Youth* calls out to all young men to stand up for what is right: “Young man, the power's in your hand/ Slam your fist on the table and make your demand/ Take a stand/Fan a fire for the flame of the youth/ Got the freedom to choose/ You better make the right move.” The song calls out to all young men to channel their energy toward positive, ethical behavior. Because of the themes of greater inclusion and acceptance in his music and his interviews, fans—and even critics—have not identified him with the exclusivist and judgmental aspects they associate with Chabad.

Another aspect of his inclusiveness is a little more difficult for him to navigate: the strictures on contact with women. First, he attempts not to make it an issue. Acute observers of Matisyahu performances have noticed that he tries to avoid looking at women in his audience.<sup>14</sup> However, he does not discuss this practice, nor does he chastise the women there for their lack of modesty. But journalists have often asked him about the Orthodox interpretation of the Talmudic law prohibiting bodily contact between men and women to whom they are not married. In three separate *Rolling Stone* articles about Matisyahu, each time the writer discusses this religious prohibition. Each time, Matisyahu tries to deflect any perception of misogyny. A 2005 article began: “There's one thing Hasidic reggae man Matisyahu won't do on his new U.S. tour: stage dive [jump off the stage and onto the supporting hands of the crowd]. ‘There's a law that no man and woman may touch unless they're married,’ says the twenty-six-year-old MC. ‘I was caught doing it. So I checked, and, no, can't do that anymore – there's women touching you for sure. That, and I also I got dropped once. I took, like, six people down.’”<sup>15</sup> Immediately after noting that he no longer stage dives because women might touch him, he uses humor and an alternative explanation for his decision to stop. Rather than discussing the religious justifications or debating

the image of women's place in Hasidism, he simply offers an additional practical reason not to stage dive.

On being prohibited from shaking women's hands, he employed a slightly different technique: "It's hard to sign CDs and tell every other person that comes over to you some form of 'no,' and you don't have time to get into a discussion as to why you can't. It can come off as disrespectful."<sup>16</sup> Here Matisyahu demonstrates concern and sympathy for his female fans.

Although he follows religious law, he suggests, it is not out of any disrespect for women. He also begins by framing it as an emotionally difficult situation for himself: "It's hard." Here he signals that he feels some conflict when acting out this religious stricture. By doing this, he sets himself up to be sympathetic rather than superior. Despite Matisyahu's careful treatment of the issue, he still has his detractors on the issue of contact with women. However, female fans seem to respect his refusal to touch women as a religious act. Female fans' comments on fan sites and blogs also suggest that individual women who have tried to shake hands with him have received explanations and come away from the experience feeling it was positive rather than insulting.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike his religious inclusiveness and attempts at navigating openness toward women within the strictures of religious law, Matisyahu's penchant for racial inclusiveness is rarely discussed explicitly. (In fact, as we will see later, discussions of Matisyahu and race have centered on different issues.) Nevertheless, his story suggests the ongoing influence of the reggae music of black musicians on his own development. When asked about his musical influences, he always points to Bob Marley. When Matisyahu tells the story of how he came to Judaism, he begins with the biblical themes of exile and Zion that he heard in reggae music. He has collaborated with black artists, and he recorded part of his 2009 *Light* album in Jamaica. He still

tours with an all-white band and has mostly white fans, but Matisyahu has mostly managed to avoid a major stigma of the Hasidic image: racism.

Race relations are a sore subject for those concerned with the image of Hasidim in the United States. Especially during and after the riots in Crown Heights in 1991, Hasidic communities have garnered bad press for racism. Leaving aside the question of just how racist any given Hasidic community is, the community's publicly espoused value of exclusivity has exacerbated the issue.<sup>18</sup> In Henry Goldschmidt's analysis of the conflict, one Hasidic woman sums up her position on Black-Jewish dialogue: "We don't want it. They don't want it either... We're not interested. We're just insular. You don't like my being insular, that's your problem."<sup>19</sup> It is such attitudes that embarrass and infuriate other non-Hasidic Jews who value dialogue between communities. Matisyahu's story, on the other hand, embodies a kind of dialogue between Bob Marley and Shlomo Carlebach, and between the biblical themes of reggae music and Judaism.

Therefore, these kinds of inclusiveness—a pan-Jewish acceptance, multi-racial influences and interlocutors, and (limited) interaction with women—all mark Matisyahu as a non-threatening Hasid to his American non-Hasidic audiences. He plays the part of inspiring nostalgia by his dress and religious observance while simultaneously downplaying the aspects of Chabad life that non-Hasidic Jews (and many non-Jews) find unsavory.

Matisyahu's inclusiveness, the very quality that allows him to be popular among non-Hasidic Jews, divides his fellow *frum*—or strictly observant—Jews. Some see his stardom and music as good tools for recruiting non-observant Jews, as Chabad.org did in its Passover article. While one could consider this debate an issue of whether the ends (recruiting more Jews to

observance) justify the means (performing in a popular, non-Jewish style in front of mixed-sex audiences), in most cases, those who argue on both sides root their arguments in authenticity.

Those who support Matisyahu can fit him into line with the very mission of Chabad-Lubavitch: to bring Jews “back to” observant Judaism and to serve as a “light to the [non-Jewish] nations.” Chabad sends its *schlichim* (emissaries) to all corners of the world, where they try to bring Jews to greater observance. Traditionally these *schlichim* are young, newly married couples, and they are encouraged to interact with those around them while setting a Hasidic example. Moreover, as Jeffrey Shandler has demonstrated, Chabad has begun to take advantage of new communication technologies like live feeds on the internet to promote and enhance the Lubavitch religious experience.<sup>20</sup> Matisyahu, then, could serve as a cutting-edge *shaliach*: he is young and brings his own life as an example and message to a similarly young audience. There is a group on the popular social networking site Facebook entitled “Matisyahu Inspired Me and Now I am More Religious.” Numerous individual fans from within the Chabad-Lubavitch community have even called him a “shaliach, without the politics” and “a shaliach in his own right.”<sup>21</sup> According to this view, Matisyahu is the picture of an authentic Lubavitcher: he goes out into the world and sets a good example for others to follow.

Those who argue against Matisyahu’s performances argue that he and his behavior are not truly *frum*. Some critics have called it an “imitation” of the *goyim*, or non-Jews, while others have suggested that it cannot be truly Jewish the lyrics are set to “non-Jewish” music. Both of these critiques suggest that the root of the problem is that the music and performance are not authentically and properly Jewish; that is, Matisyahu is unacceptable because he is not genuinely Jewish. Some have gone so far as to claim that his music and performance are a defamation of God. One commenter on a site for Orthodox women stated simply, “Chillul Hashem

[Defamation of God's name]. You don't bring yourself to *goyishe* [non-Jewish] ways to attract [people].”<sup>22</sup> The commenter connects the defamation of God's name to Matisyahu's inauthenticity: rather than act truly religious, she asserts, he imitates non-Jews.

These critics are particularly concerned with “outing” Matisyahu as *goyish* because he seems to be Orthodox. For instance, the Hasidic community did not bother to debate the acceptability of the Beastie Boys, a rap group comprised of Jews. This is not because they found the group acceptable, but rather because everyone deemed both the group and their music as *goyish* from the outset. Detractors see Matisyahu, on the other hand, as more dangerous precisely because both he and his music seem to be Jewish. However, they argue, he is not properly Jewish because he performs in front of immodest women, he brings up the topic of drugs (even though he argues against their use), and he sings in non-Jewish styles. Thus, both he and his music are not *kosher*, even if they make look like it. In this view, his inauthenticity, then, is the root of the problem.

Others who tentatively support Matisyahu take a pragmatic approach: if their children are going to listen to music, better it be Matisyahu than most of the other alternatives. One woman, echoing a significant concern in Hasidic communities, explained that she would much rather have her children listen to Matisyahu than other things that *frum* kids get from the “outside world:” “[I]f my child would come to me and say Ma I want to listen to Mattisyahu instead of going behind my back and listening to worse I would be a very proud Mommy.”<sup>23</sup> She and other women on the site defend their choices by explaining that, even if Matisyahu is not quite as *frum* as they might wish, he is sincere and is therefore a better example than most.

After Matisyahu explained in 2007 that he no longer felt bound solely to the Chabad movement, although he and his wife and children would continue to live in the Crown Heights



community and practice Orthodox Judaism, the Orthodox blog Failedmessiah stated its disapproval: “Matisyahu was a poseur all along. It's not that he doesn't feel some connection to Judaism or *hasidut* [Hasidic way of life] – it's that he set out to use that connection for his own personal gain, to help him stand out from the crowd and get noticed. His *kapote* and fedora-wearing stage costume was just that – a costume. And when one costume gets old, he'll find another.”<sup>24</sup> This critique hinges itself on the issue of authenticity: Matisyahu, it says, was not a real Hasid. Even before he left, another contributor to the site had flatly accused: “He pimps the [Hasidic] image.”<sup>25</sup>

Matisyahu himself, on the other hand, framed his distancing himself from the Chabad-Lubavitch fold as a move of greater inclusiveness. “My initial ties were through the Lubavitch sect,” he stated. “At this point, I don't necessarily identify with it any more... I'm really religious, but the more I'm learning about other types of Jews, I don't want to exclude myself.”<sup>26</sup> Whether or not he is cognizant of it, Matisyahu's self-representation as open continues to encourage less religious Jews and non-Jews, while dividing *frum* communities. The move beyond Chabad and his choice to frame his decision in terms of inclusion have made many in the former group see him as more authentically spiritual, while many in the latter group find him less so.

### **How Reggae?**

Even beyond Matisyahu's fans and detractors, he has attracted a fair amount of attention from an unlikely crowd: cultural critics and academics. Like both fans and *frum* detractors, much of this conversation has focused on authenticity. Unlike fans, however, these cultural critics have

focused on Matisyahu's relationship to reggae music and race. If Matisyahu's fans' opinions often hinge on how authentically Jewish they find him, many critics' opinions hinge on how authentic his performance of reggae is.

Music critics have been consistently lukewarm about Matisyahu. *Rolling Stone* characterized his music as "earnest tedium."<sup>27</sup> *Paste* magazine echoed this criticism, but also pointed out a larger cultural issue: "The biggest hurdle for white, Western reggae singers to overcome is phoniness: How to make reggae without faking patois (which sounds silly and condescending), and how to embrace its themes without reducing a racially and politically charged genre to mere schtick? Matisyahu spectacularly fails to solve these predicaments, but the biggest problem with his reggae is simpler: He's unequivocally terrible at it." According to this evaluation, Matisyahu not only makes reggae poorly, but he also falls into the trap of "phoniness."

This, of course, begs the question of what it means to be either phony or authentic. Is it about "embracing" a set of "themes"? Is it using proper speech patterns, but only if they are one's native speech ("faking patois")? Must an authentic reggae singer be from Jamaica? Is authenticity measured by race, or blackness in particular? And how can one adjudicate how a performer falls on each of these scales: thematic, linguistic, geographic, racial? These questions about authenticity and performance have animated an ongoing conversation about Matisyahu. In the end, however, I will suggest that the discussion reveals more about the cultural situation of the critics than it does about Matisyahu or his music.

In his March 2006 review of a Matisyahu concert, *New York Times* music critic Kelefa Sanneh echoed the general evaluations of mediocrity: "The record is dull, and the concert was often worse."<sup>28</sup> He went on to accuse both Matisyahu and his fans of both bad taste and, more

subtly, a lack of racial awareness: “Perhaps Matisyahu’s fans aren’t familiar with a little-known group of performers who still make great reggae records: Jamaicans.” Sanneh went on to name and describe three reggae artists who are Jamaican, which he positions as both good and legitimate.

Sanneh then goes on to evaluate Matisyahu according to his racial authenticity:

Matisyahu's black hat also helps obscure something that might otherwise be more obvious: his race. He is a student of the Chabad-Lubavitch philosophy, but he is also a white reggae singer with an all-white band, playing (on Monday night, anyway) to an almost all-white crowd. Yet he has mainly avoided thorny questions about cultural appropriation. He looks like an anomaly, but if you think of him as a white pop star drawing from a black musical tradition, then he may seem like a more familiar figure.

Ironically, Sanneh’s review claimed that Matisyahu had “avoided thorny questions about cultural appropriation,” and then proceeded to skewer the artist on those very terms. By calling Matisyahu a “white pop star,” Sanneh has effectively removed him from any claim to be making real reggae. He has also suggested that what is essential about the artist is his whiteness, and not his Jewishness, Hasidic philosophy, or performance of reggae. When Sanneh positions whiteness as Matisyahu’s primary identifier and “pop music” as his genre, he effectively assigns Matisyahu a different identity. Not only does this repositioning make Matisyahu a “familiar figure,” but it also asserts that his performance of reggae is inauthentic. Sanneh’s reference to the “almost all-white crowd” also raises the issue of audience. White teenagers comprise a large portion of the market for hip-hop and rap music, for instance. This does not translate into making the artists whose music they buy less legitimate as artists or less authentic.

Sanneh, however, was not the only one who began to ask questions about Matisyahu’s relationship to race. In a controversial article at the online newsmagazine Salon.com, Jody Rosen took the idea of a white musician drawing on black musical traditions to its historical extreme: he placed Matisyahu squarely in the tradition of “blackface” or minstrelsy.<sup>29</sup> The article was widely

reposted and quoted, mostly with acclaim. In it, Rosen argues that Matisyahu is not some kind of musical novelty, but rather he is just the newest incarnation of Jews donning blackface.

[Matisyahu] is the oldest act in the show-business book. Minstrelsy dates back to the very beginnings of American popular music, and Jews have been particularly zealous and successful practitioners of the art. From Irving Berlin's blackface ragtime numbers to Al Jolson's mammy songs—from jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow, who passed as black, to Bob Dylan, who channeled the cadences of black bluesmen, to the Beastie Boys—successive generations of Jewish musicians have used the blackface mask to negotiate Jewish identity and have made some great art in the process.

While Rosen makes an interesting point, his quick collapse of minstrelsy, blackface, and Jews singing music influenced by black traditions obscures more than it illuminates. (For instance, Al Jolson performed his mammy songs while wearing cork on his face while Bob Dylan and the Beastie Boys acknowledged their musical debts to African American performers and traditions, but they did not perform *as* black musicians.) First, I will explore the ways that Rosen constructs Matisyahu's identity, and then I will return to the issue of blackface and its implications.

Rosen echoed Sanneh's treatment of the issues of Matisyahu's identity and authenticity: "Matisyahu is like a thousand other white guys from the suburbs who've smoked a lot of dope, listened to some Burning Spear records, and decided to become reggae singers." What Rosen deems authentic about Matisyahu is his whiteness ("like a thousand other white guys"), his socioeconomic class ("from the suburbs") and his drug use ("who've smoked a lot of dope"). His longstanding love for reggae music and his citation of Bob Marley as a major musical influence are sidelined. His engagement with both theological and musical themes of exile and Zion are deemed nonessential—or perhaps even inauthentic. In the construction of identity, for Rosen, Matisyahu's whiteness and suburban upbringing trump his other experiences and even his self-identification.

Similarly, indie music's darling website *Pitchfork* began each of its reviews of his four releases by identifying him in the first sentences as white, suburban, and a latecomer to Hasidism. In addition to blasting his musical chops, one review also indicted the star himself on charges of phoniness and chalked up his life path to consequences of his class: "his struggle reeks of bored rich kid."<sup>30</sup> The review of Matisyahu's 2006 LP *Youth* also questioned the sincerity of his Jewishness: "Matisyahu (née Matthew Miller) is a guy from White Plains, N.Y. who smoked weed and followed Phish and played in those drum circles everyone hates. One spiritual breakthrough later, he realized he loved dancehall reggae and Judaism (order unclear) and started making music."<sup>31</sup> By belittling his move to Orthodox Judaism ("one spiritual breakthrough later"), the reviewer implies that both his affinity for reggae music and his religious convictions are ephemeral, while the stable part of his identity is the "guy from White Plains." Perhaps disingenuous, or perhaps just flighty, these reviews suggest, Matisyahu cannot possibly be a genuine Hasid and make genuine music because the essence of his identity is white and suburban.

Rosen also positioned Matisyahu's Jewishness as secondary: "Turns out, he's a *Baal Teshuvah*, or penitent, a secular Jew who 'returned' to the Orthodox fold—before he was Matisyahu, he was Matthew Miller, White Plains, N.Y., native and student at the New School University in Greenwich Village. Most tellingly, he was a dreadlocked Phish fanatic, from which we may infer that prior to discovering 'Torah food,' he had a rather different attitude toward [marijuana]." Why are dreadlocks, the band Phish, and drug use "most telling"? Why should they be given greater priority or be more "telling" than his peyes, reverence for Shlomo Carlebach, and Torah study? Rosen implied—and here he is in the company of quite a few critics

from both inside and outside of Orthodoxy—that somehow *ba'alei teshuva* are not quite legitimate or even insincere in their religious Jewishness.

Rosen continues this logic on the physical level: “Well, you can cut off the Phish follower’s dreads, put him in 18<sup>th</sup>-century garb, and immerse him in Talmudic midrash—but the pull of post-hippie music is strong.” Here Rosen suggests that the musical part of Matisyahu’s identity is legitimate and rooted, while the Judaism is a kind of “garb” or outer layer. He makes this explicit when he writes “In 2006, Matisyahu wears Old World ‘Jewface,’” which implies that Hasidism is a kind of self-consciously theatrically performed identity, a kind of dress-up for Matisyahu. But every identity—racial, religious, gendered—is a kind of performance of norms, even a kind of dressing up. Performing norms, be they racial, religious, or gendered, does not make the performer any less “authentic.” In fact, performing these norms one of the primary ways that identities are constructed.<sup>32</sup> The question then becomes how a person attains the right or privilege to perform these norms and be considered authentic. (For instance, even though race is socially constructed, it is doubtful that Matisyahu would be considered black. But could some consider him to be making authentic reggae—a genre whose meaning is certainly bound up with both blackness and oppression—if he performed according to its musical and thematic norms?)

In his discussion of why Matisyahu is not a “deconstructionist rabbi,” Louis Kaplan cites Rosen’s configuration and extends it. In Kaplan’s formulation, both identities are (mere) performances: “In the making of Matisyahu and the construction of his persona, we are faced with a ‘double drag’ performance that has served as a winning combination and continues to fascinate audiences—Jewface and blackface, Hasidface and Rastaface.”<sup>33</sup>

Kaplan claims to sketch the “superimposition of masks projected by the Hasidic reggae superstar.”<sup>34</sup> Again, while one could reasonably argue that every person wears “masks” to some

extent in order to make herself intelligible, Kaplan emphasizes the separation between Matisyahu and Hasidic identity as well as reggae norms. Kaplan calls the masks at once “superimposed”—two masks, both masking any “real” (white, suburban) identity—and “projected,” that is, not emanating from within, not essential, and spatially apart from the performer. Of course, norms of identity, be they Jewish or black or reggae, are socially constructed and therefore always in some sense “apart” from any individual actor. But Kaplan positions Matisyahu as a performer who freely dons and removes identities as one might change clothes: according to Kaplan, Matisyahu “play[s] at both Hasid and Rasta.”<sup>35</sup> The picture Kaplan, Rosen, and many other music critics paint is one of a truly white middle-class young man who “puts on” the identities of Hasidic Jewishness (“Old World Jewface”) and reggae stardom (“blackface”), neither of which authentically belong to him. His performance is “subtle and clever,” he asserts, but can never be anything more than a performance that cites someone else’s identity.

Whiteness, however, has not been an insurmountable issue for others to rise to prominence in the reggae world. Collie Buddz, for instance, is a white reggae musician who sings and speaks in a Bermudan accent. Reviewers have embraced his music, even though he is neither a practitioner of Rastafarianism nor a native Islander (he was born in New Orleans and has lived in Bermuda since age five). Reviewers have received him positively; they address issue of authenticity and rule in favor of Buddz as the genuine article. None have mentioned blackface. Buddz himself has said “Race hasn’t been an issue for me... Reggae crowds can be very demanding, but if they like you, they will show you love like no one else.”<sup>36</sup> It seems that geographic location, in Buddz’s case living in Bermuda, takes priority over his race when determining authenticity.

The reputations of certain geographic locations—and especially their associations with socioeconomic class—also seem to contribute to the apparent authenticity of an act. The white rapper Eminem is probably the best known example: he was raised in a working-class neighborhood in Detroit, and despite some initial questioning of his legitimacy, has become immensely respected in the rap world for his talent and performance. Reggae, similarly, has seen a growing number of white artists in the last decade. In an interview with *The Times*, British reggae artist Bobby Kray explained that reggae reflected his own roots: “I grew up in Ladbroke Grove.” He also said that he finds race to be a non-issue: “It rarely comes up, to be honest. It’s never been an issue for me or my audiences... I love the music and all I’m doing is trying to represent it.”<sup>37</sup> A presumed work-class upbringing aligned him with reggae’s themes of freedom from oppression and redemption. Native Sicilian reggae artist Alborosie also explained how his geographic home may have helped him seem authentic: “Coming from Sicily has benefited me. Everyone knows it as where the gangsters come from - a badman place - and there’s an affinity with that, but none of that matters when you’re performing here. Everything is at a higher level and you’re up against the best.”

Each of these three white reggae artists moves subtly from the issue of race into the issue of talent. Buddz talks about how reggae crowds can be won over by good performance, Kray goes on to discuss how he tries to do the genre justice, and Alborosie discusses being evaluated according to one’s performance. In addition to race, class, and geographic origin, one must also begin to suspect that critical acclaim and talent (as judged by others) have a relationship to being deemed authentic.

Once Rosen has constructed Matisyahu’s identity as white and middle-class, he can then move on to position the artist in the history of entertainers who impersonated African Americans



by putting on blackface. One of the major difficulties with positioning Matisyahu as a contemporary blackface performer is, ironically, its neglect of the original historical context of blackface. I will explore three of these differences, which I consider important to understanding both minstrelsy's historical context and the contemporary cultural context that allows critics to imagine Matisyahu as a blackface performer. First, historical blackface performers emphasized the dual nature of their performances: the on-stage characters versus the real-life; second, these performances circumscribed the available opportunities and roles for real-life African Americans; third, Jews were not yet racial insiders.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, blackface performers were careful to demonstrate the difference between themselves as performers and their characters. Especially in response to audiences who thought they were watching actual black performers, these musicians wanted to solidify their own place in the social structure. To this end, as Eric Lott has explained, many theater groups would advertise their performances with two pictures: one where the men wore burnt cork, hats and "farm clothing" costumes and the other where they were bare-faced and white and wearing suits and neckties.<sup>38</sup> These pictures left a clear impression: the blackface and the white man are two separate identities.

Matisyahu, on the other hand, bases his identity on oneness. In a 2005 interview, before both Sanneh's review and Rosen's article, with *Rolling Stone*, Matisyahu talked about the relationship between race and authenticity. He said that he took his cues from Bob Marley's music: "At first I thought that meant that culture is dreadlocks, culture is black -- that's what's right and cool. But then I realized he was really saying, 'Figure out your roots, and be true to them.'"<sup>39</sup> According to Matisyahu, then, identity is a process of discerning one's "roots" and then acting in accordance with them. For Matisyahu, these roots were both Judaism and music,

and his task, as he saw it, was to construct an identity that was “true” to both of them. There could be no Matisyahu promotional poster that showed him in costume and out of costume precisely because he values the integration of the parts of his identity.

Although the integration of African American musical traditions and Hasidism may not seem apparent, Matisyahu has explained that it the music is what helps bring them together. In a 2006 interview, he explained his routine before going on stage:

I try to have 15 minutes of quiet time, and I pray and meditate on God and what being Jewish means to me. But once I get that down, then I turn on Jay-Z and drink a glass of wine, and I turn into Brooklyn and I do my thing. To some it seems like a huge split, but for me, that’s always what I’ve been. I’ve always had these two sides of myself. But they’re not that different. My music is about bringing them together.<sup>40</sup>

He prays and listens to Jay-Z, and he does not see this as a departure from his identity, or even a change over time. Instead, he says, “that’s always what I’ve been.” To hear him tell it, far from performing an identity he is not—like white men performing in blackface—Matisyahu performs in order to integrate his own identity. Music, then, facilitates coherence of his identity and authenticity.

However, Matisyahu’s self-described identity is not among culturally common forms, and it does draw on two different traditions—Hasidism and black music—neither of which he was “born into.” Cultural critics, unlike his *frum* critics, are mostly willing to grant Matisyahu some form of spiritual Jewishness as part of his identity. But they are much less likely to countenance his performance of reggae, and especially his patois. One might ask, simply: Is it blackface if one’s face is framed by *peyes*? Not only does Matisyahu not cover his face in burnt cork, but he also does not wear dreadlocks or make any attempt to “look” black or Jamaican. In fact, he “looks” Jewish, a fact which critics are quick to point out as a selling point for its novelty

value. His themes are explicitly Jewish, and he does not sing about Rastafarianism or about growing up in the ghetto.

Cultural appropriation can be a difficult ethical line to tread, and I am not suggesting that one needs to give Matisyahu *carte blanche* in that area. It is entirely defensible to argue that Matisyahu and artists like him should not sing reggae because they have not experienced the economic and social history of oppression that black Jamaicans have. It is also legitimate to question whether he might represent another example of white musicians capitalizing on black tradition for the purpose of making money from white audiences. But labeling his performance blackface diverts attention from those kinds of questions to making asymmetrical historical comparisons that can distort both the history and the contemporary subject. This is not to say that the history of blackface has nothing to tell us about the situation; but it does tell us much more about the cultural reaction to Matisyahu than anything about the performer himself.

In addition to emphasizing the duality of performers, blackface as popular entertainment also defined and constricted the available roles—both on stage and in society—for African Americans to play. In the late nineteenth century, as Michael Rogin explains in his study of Jews and blackface, even African Americans who performed onstage often had to “put on blackface,” but this was only the most obvious of the ways that black performers themselves were constrained by blackface.<sup>41</sup> Bert Williams, the most famous of these men, adopted the personality of a slow-witted, shuffling man who spoke with a drawl that was “a foreign dialect” to him. Despite being black, Bert Williams was constrained to portraying a role that was created by white performers in blackface. Lott has suggested a similar interpretation of the appropriation and reconstruction of black characters on stage: “[T]urning black forms into ‘stock in trade’ was not merely an unconscious extension of antebellum economics but itself an expression of white

interest in black performance; and that interest was indeed a matter of ownership.”<sup>42</sup> Here Lott argues that when white performers created “stock” characters—and simultaneously erased space for other kinds of representations of black people—it was a kind of ownership of black performance. That is, white performances in large part determined the possibilities of *all* performances of blackness.

Contemporary reggae music does not replicate this dynamic. Black reggae artists, although often influenced by experiences of racism and economic limitations, are not constrained to performing roles that white artists have dictated for them. This is not to suggest that artists like Matisyahu are not privileged, or that black reggae artists have access to some sort of untrammelled and infinitely free expression. Rather, I want to point out that constructing a contemporary Jewish artist’s performance of reggae as blackface can actually obscure the ways that blackface and minstrelsy have historically worked to construct and constrain black bodies and experiences.

In addition to the duality of performers and the construction of African American roles, critics neglect that in the tradition of blackface and its historical and social context, Jews were still racially marked. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when minstrelsy was a popular form of entertainment, Jews in America were thought of as not-quite-white. Depending on the racial theory one subscribed to, Jews could be their own race or a smaller part of a Semitic race, or an inferior subgroup of the white race. While Jews were certainly not considered black, nor did they experience the social and economic disadvantages of blacks, they were not quite white Americans either.

For a moment, we see the man behind the curtain, and he lets it slip: Jews are not racially unmarked. The minor explosion of discourse on blackface—however misapplied—continues to

call attention to the racial markings of Jews. Contemporary commentators who want to place Matisyahu in the tradition of blackface have assumed that Jews are unproblematically white. While this might be true on some level in contemporary America (and that is an issue for another day), it was certainly untrue during the time of minstrelsy's popularity.

Whether they are intentional about it or not, when critics situate Matisyahu in the tradition of blackface, they simultaneously shore up Jews' identity as white and part of mainstream American culture. Chastising one's own group for cultural appropriation can also serve to reaffirm a place of privilege. And discussing Matisyahu in the context of blackface functions as a way of (re)asserting his whiteness. The very fact that commentators deploy the category of blackface, then, tells us more about the critics and current society than about Matisyahu and his relationship to blackness.

Discussions about Matisyahu and blackface also ultimately circle back around to the issue of authenticity: is he acting? The authenticity of his identity becomes the barometer for whether or not people grant Matisyahu their stamp of approval. Detractors, like the case of his *frum* critics, are mostly concerned that their own identity not be sullied by Matisyahu's seeming embodiment of it. Critics, especially those who find his music mediocre, want to expose him for what he "really is:" someone familiar (white, suburban, borrowing black music) rather than someone exotic (Hasidic, reggae performer). Fans seem to find his performance convincing, or perhaps they understand that all identity is a kind of performance. Many of his musical peers, too, find him to be a compelling figure. In a 2005 *Rolling Stone* article, D'niscio Brooks, an organizer of the music festival Reggae Carifest expressed his respect for Matisyahu: "He sticks to his virtues... When I first heard Matisyahu, I was taken aback, just at the thought of a Hasidic Jew doing reggae . . . but he's so authentic.""<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A transcript of the program is available at [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/december-11-2009/matisyahu/5191/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/december-11-2009/matisyahu/5191/)

<sup>2</sup> Horn, Jordana. "The Evolution of an Icon." *Jewish Daily Forward*. December 18, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Only the Lubavitcher community uses the term *farbrengen* for this kind of gathering. When other Hasidic communities gather to hear the Rebbe teach and sing, they call it a *Tish*, Yiddish for table, because the Rebbe would often sit at a table to teach and all gathered would eat together.

<sup>4</sup> Moss, Corey. "P.O.D. Find New Hope with Interfaith Matisyahu Marriage" <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1521598/20060125/pod.jhtml> January, 25, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Matisyahu's Passover." [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/376771/jewish/Matisyahus-Passover.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/376771/jewish/Matisyahus-Passover.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Whether or not contemporary Hasidim in fact replicate life in the "old world," many secular Jews project that meaning onto contemporary Hasidic communities.

<sup>8</sup> Rubel, Nora. *Doubting the Devout*. Columbia UP, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, "The View" television show, January 21, 2009; Interviewees in Fishkoff, Susan. *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch*. Schocken, 2005, p. 120, 130, 136.

<sup>10</sup> Umansky, Ellen. "The Rebbe's Teachings." *Tablet*. October 29, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Fishkoff, Susan. *The Rebbe's Army*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> "The Evolution of an Icon."

<sup>14</sup> Thank you to Annalise Glauz-Todrank for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>15</sup> Bliss, Karen. "Matisyahu Spaces Out." Nov 8, 2005.; Serpick, Evan. "Matisyahu: Hasidic Hot Stepper" Feb 24, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Gitlin, Lauren. "Matisyahu Bring Kosher Vibration." Feb 14, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, the comments on the blogs at [www.edwindecker.com/2007/01/just\\_another\\_yahumatisyahu\\_ins.html](http://www.edwindecker.com/2007/01/just_another_yahumatisyahu_ins.html) and [dixplicit.blogspot.com/2006/10/matisyahu-woman-hater.html](http://dixplicit.blogspot.com/2006/10/matisyahu-woman-hater.html)

<sup>18</sup> Racism, especially anti-black sentiment, is still a very live issue for Hasidic communities. In connection with Matisyahu, for instance, one commenter wrote: "My father says that one day at a concert some black is gona [sic] shoot him cuz he's 'stealing' their audience."

<http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=11205&sid=6d449360c1967696faa272d20083b4ba>

No one responded negatively to this comment. Elsewhere, Hasidic newspapers and newsletters published in Yiddish still use terms like *shvartze* [black], *shchoirim* [blacks, Hebrew] and *tinkel-hautige* [dark-skinned], all of which have negative connotations.

<sup>19</sup> Goldschmidt, Henry. *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*. Rutgers UP, 2006. p. 117-118

<sup>20</sup> Shandler, Jeffrey. *Jews, God, and Videotape*. NYU Press, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://chabloglubavitch.blogspot.com> and Diamant, Jeff. "Rapper, singer Matisyahu infuses his faith into uplifting lyrics" *Star Ledger* August 21, 2006

<sup>22</sup> The site is "Imamother: Connecting Frum Women" and has a long, ongoing discussion about whether or not Matisyahu's music is appropriate for Jews in general and *frum* kids in particular. [www.imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?printertopic=1&t=6408&start=0&postdays=0&postorder=asc&vote=viewresult&sid=718e698fbd52f0e8e614d49c92662d02](http://www.imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?printertopic=1&t=6408&start=0&postdays=0&postorder=asc&vote=viewresult&sid=718e698fbd52f0e8e614d49c92662d02)

<sup>23</sup> "Imamother." [imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=5404&postdays=0&postorder=asc&&start=0](http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=5404&postdays=0&postorder=asc&&start=0)

<sup>24</sup> Orthodox (and anti-Chabad) blog *failedmessiah.com* Oct 9, 2007

<sup>25</sup> Rosenberg, Shmarya. "Chabad's Very Own Messianic Rasta #1." *failedmessiah.com* March 2, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Cunningham, Jonathan. "Matisyahu Tonight at Sound Advice Amphitheater" *Miami New Times*. July 17, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Horde, Christian. "Review: Matisyahu: Light" *Rolling Stone*. August 29, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Sanneh, Kalefa. "Matisyahu: Dancehall with a Different Accent." *New York Times*. March 8, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Rosen, Jody. "G-d's Reggae Star: How Matisyahu Became a Pop Phenomenon." *Slate.com*. March 14, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Fennessey, Sean. "Matisyahu: Youth. Album Review." *Pitchfork*. [pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/5661-youth/](http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/5661-youth/)

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Here I am thinking of the influential work of Judith Butler about how sex and gender are constructed through performativity. Her insights have been extended to consider how other aspects of identity, such as race and class, are similarly (and differently) constructed through performance.

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- <sup>33</sup> Kaplan, Louis. "Yahweh Rastafari!: Matisyahu and the Aporias of Reggae Superstardom." *Centennial Review* 7.1, 2008. 25.
- <sup>34</sup> Kaplan, 25.
- <sup>35</sup> Kaplan, 28.
- <sup>36</sup> Stelfox, David. "Play that Funky Music, White Boy." *The Guardian*. April 11, 2008.
- <sup>37</sup> Heawood, Sophie. "Play that Reggae Music, White Kids." *The Times*. August 31, 2007.
- <sup>38</sup> See an excellent illustration of one such brochure in Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*. Oxford UP, 1995. p. 21
- <sup>39</sup> Khazzoom, Loolwa. "Matisyahu Keeps the Faith," *Rolling Stone*. Apr 19, 2005
- <sup>40</sup> Cunningham.
- <sup>41</sup> Rogin, Michael. *Blackface, White Noise*. University of California Press, 1995.
- <sup>42</sup> Lott, 43.
- <sup>43</sup> Khazzoom.